

# Records Management

## Introduction

The term records management can have two basic meanings:

1. **The collection of methods** — e.g., micrographics, files management and inactive records storage — **used to control records**, and
2. **The specific processes of records control** -- which include records inventory, records scheduling and records disposition.

The following section describes the basic records management processes of the second definition: inventory, scheduling and disposition.

## Records Management Objectives

The objectives of a records management program are to make records serve the purposes for which they were created as efficiently and economically as possible, and to provide for proper disposition after they have served their purposes. A records management program provides the means of controlling records beginning with creation or receipt, continuing through organization and maintenance, and concluding with disposition. The coordination of the records management process for state, county and municipal governments in New Jersey is the work of the Bureau of Records Management, Division of Archives and Records Management in the Department of State.

## The Records Management Process

### Records Inventory

Record holdings must be inventoried before appropriate controls can be instituted. An inventory is a complete listing of records by record series, together with necessary descriptions and supporting information. A record series is a group of identical or related records that is normally filed together, and that can be evaluated as a unit to determine how long they should be maintained. Examples of record series can be found in the General Retention Schedule for County and Municipal Agencies.

The most common misconception about the inventory process is the amount of time needed to accomplish the task. This is due to a misunderstanding of the concept of a record series.

Consider a common record series like "correspondence." For records inventory purposes, there is no need to know who generated or received a particular letter or memorandum, nor what subject matter was discussed. It would certainly be a difficult task to sift through the files of even a small office if such information were needed. It is important to realize that such detail is not needed.

This is equally true for any other examples of record series held by government offices, such as purchase orders, travel vouchers, cancelled checks, personnel records, etc. In all cases, the records inventory is not concerned with the particular details of content.

The inventory process focuses on the general function and overall content of records. It also provides for the identification of record medium (e.g., paper, magnetic tape and floppy disk), size, filing method, reference rate, current volume and annual accumulation. All of this information should be noted on a Records Series Inventory form.

Inventory data is not used exclusively for retention scheduling. Such information becomes crucial to other aspects of managing records:

1. **Accumulation rates** are a factor in deciding whether to microfilm a record series,
2. **Filing methods** may illustrate problems with retrieval,
3. **Frequency of use** i.e., reference rates, will determine when to place records in storage.

Given the frequency with which data collection and processing requirements change, inventories and schedules should be reviewed every one to three years.

Division analysts usually conduct records inventories in local government agencies on a periodic basis and are always available to aid them in reviewing their record holdings, adding or deleting items from existing retention schedules or instituting records inventories for the first time. Brief planning and orientation sessions for agency staff, which summarize inventory techniques, procedures and benefits, are available at no cost. Sessions may be arranged by having a key staff member visit division offices or by having a records analyst visit agency offices.

## Records Retention Schedules

After records are inventoried, they are placed on "records retention schedules." Every record series on a schedule is:

1. Assigned an item number,
2. Given a title, a brief description of function and contents, including appropriate form numbers or applicable statutory references,
3. Given a retention period i.e., a specification of the length of time the record must be maintained, and in some cases, how long it may be kept in semi-current storage in a records storage center, and

4. Given a final disposition i.e., if the record will be destroyed, held permanently by the office of origin, or placed in an archives.

The scheduling process is ongoing and involves close cooperation between the division and appropriate officials. Many counties have designated officials responsible for the records management of their organizations. These officials work very closely with division analysts.

Most local government agency and authority records have already been placed on retention schedules by division analysts. These schedules consist of:

1. Specific schedules which list the record series that are unique to a particular, discrete subdivision of county or municipal government, e.g., airport, clerk, sheriff, et. al., and
2. The “General Records Schedule for County and Municipal Agencies” which lists records that are common to most offices, e.g., correspondence, invoices, personnel files.

As new records and forms are created or received, division analysts and appropriate agency contacts should update retention schedules at the same time. For many local government agencies, records schedules are often established or amended when agencies begin using a new records storage center or request authorization for records disposal from the division. The division is continuously appraising county and municipal government records and revising retention schedules.

Schedules are also used as evaluation tools in files management, and microfilm system studies as well as in general office efficiency reviews.

### Schedule Approval Process

Once a new or changed record series has been identified, division analysts evaluate the record series in terms of:

1. **Legal and fiscal requirements** — relevant statutory laws, regulations, statutes of limitation, administrative and court decisions, and audit requirements,
2. **Administrative requirements** — past precedents, usefulness in office management, and common sense, and
3. **Historical requirements** — evidence of significant actions or transactions affecting the public and worthy of permanent preservation.

Preliminary determinations of the length of time needed to retain records are based on these requirements. Division analysts submit a proposed schedule for review to the office maintaining the records as well as to offices whose authority and responsibilities bear on the matter.

Often, as part of the schedule review process, county and municipal professional associations provide additional advice. As of 1990, some of the local government professional associations involved with the schedule review process have been:

New Jersey County Clerks' Association	New Jersey Election Officials Association
County Jail Warden Association	State Association of County Adjusters
New Jersey Recreation & Parks Association	New Jersey Association of Planning Officials
Association of Municipal Assessors of New Jersey	Building Officials of New Jersey, Inc.
Municipal Clerks Association of New Jersey, Inc.	American Planning Association
New Jersey Institute of Municipal Attorneys	New Jersey Recreation and Parks Assoc.
New Jersey Society of Municipal Engineers, Inc.	Tax Collectors and Treasures Assoc. of N.J.

After a schedule is reviewed and agreed upon by officials, it is submitted for approval to the State Records Committee. The Committee consists of representatives of the State Attorney General, the State Auditor, State Treasurer, Director of Local Government Services in the Department of Community Affairs, and the Director of the Division of Archives and Records Management in the Department of State. This body has final authority on matters involving public records, regardless of the record's medium, i.e. paper, microfilm, magnetic tape, floppy disks, optical disk, etc.

The State Records Committee reviews proposed retention schedules at their regularly scheduled meetings. Meetings are attended by division analysts as well as representatives from county agencies and authorities.

State Records Committee approval ensures that retention periods satisfy all legal, fiscal, administrative and historical obligations, thereby protecting the public interest. The committee either approves a schedule as presented, recommends changes and approves with changes, or withholds approval pending further information.

Once a proposed schedule has been approved, it is signed by the Secretary of the State Records Committee, and becomes a legal, enforceable document that specifies the minimum amount of time a given record series must be held and indicates the manner of disposition after such a period has elapsed.

### **Schedule Publication**

The division publishes the General Records Schedule for County and Municipal Agencies as well as specific retention schedules for individual offices; these are available upon request. Updates of individual schedules and new schedules are provided to the affected agency after all approvals have been secured.

### **Schedule Amendments**

Records schedules are modified to reflect the changing information requirements of government. The process of changing an existing retention schedule is the same as the approval process for new schedules. Changes can include any component of a record series: title, description, retention period or disposition. Factors which may make revisions necessary include new legal, administrative, or fiscal requirements. Amendments are considered for any appropriate reason and can be initiated by contacting the division.

## Records Disposition

### Definition

Records can be disposed of in one of two ways:

1. **Physical destruction** — through shredding, burning, discarding or recycling, or
2. **Transfer of ownership** — through awarding custody to a proprietor other than the originating agency - e.g., a county archives, library or museum or the State Archives.

### Authorization Process

In order to legally dispose of records, local government officials must fill out a “Request and Authorization for Records Disposal” form. The following information should be included on the form: record series title, item number, inclusive dates, retention period, and volume in cubic feet. Copies of the “Request and Authorization for Records Disposal” form are available from the division.

This form is legally required to document an official request for destruction by all state, county and municipal agencies. By signing and counter-signing this form, officials indicate their awareness of what they wish to dispose. This process ensures that records earmarked for destruction have outlived their value to the public.

All requests submitted to the division are checked against current records retention schedules. Each record series appearing on a schedule is keyed to an item number with corresponding title, description, and retention and disposition requirements.

Unusual or unique situations, such as unscheduled records, are resolved through the monthly cycle of State Records Committee meetings. Whenever an official discovers an unscheduled records series, the division should be notified to begin the scheduling process.

A majority of disposal requests submitted by state, county and municipal governments are checked, approved and returned within a week of their receipt by the division. For the remaining fraction, authorization is withheld pending further clarification. Some common errors that result in approval delays are:

1. **Omission of necessary signatures** — All requests for records disposal must be signed by two officials from the requesting agency in addition to the agency's auditor when applicable. On forms listing fiscal records, the law specifies acknowledgement by an auditor that fiscal records are not needed for future audits.
2. **Omission of microfilm certification letter** — On forms where paper copies of microfilmed records eligible for destruction are listed, the law requires inclusion of a guarantee that microfilming has been conducted according to minimum quality and documentation standards.

3. **Incomplete information** — Failure to provide inclusive dates, volumes to be destroyed, etc.
4. **Incorrect information** — Listing item numbers, record series titles, and retention periods which do not correspond to the appropriate retention schedule.

Remedying these errors is most often accomplished by telephone or by mailing omitted materials. In all cases where necessary signatures are missing from request forms, the forms are returned to the agency.

The "Request and Authorization for Records Disposal" form is printed in quadruplicate. After a request has been reviewed and granted, the white "original" is detached and kept permanently by the division. The pink "agency copy" is returned to the requesting office and should be maintained there permanently. The goldenrod copy is kept by the county's or municipality's auditor. Once approved and the records are actually disposed of, the yellow or "follow up" copy is mailed back to the division by the agency that initiated the request. This "follow up" copy documents date and method of disposition and is attached to the "original" held by the division. This process is required of all state, county and municipal government agencies and authorities.

The division's review process ensures that minor errors are corrected quickly, loss of valuable documents is prevented, and that potential legal and fiscal predicaments are avoided. Without this standard, central authorization process, every agency would have to develop its own records destruction policy and procedure.

By complying with the statewide destruction authorization process, the liability for inconsistent or illegal records destruction is removed from the individual agency. The division is able to ensure the legal disposal of records on a statewide basis through this single procedure and form, with a fast turnaround time for approval.

### Benefits of Compliance

By using mandated, statewide procedures for legal disposal of records, local government agencies and authorities gain a consistent policy with uniform standards. The benefits of systematic, legal disposition include:

1. **Economies** -- Avoidance or savings in purchase and maintenance of real estate, equipment and supplies, staff time, and
2. **Efficiencies** -- Increases in efficiency and safety through the removal of unnecessary files.

Additionally, use of the statewide disposal process may settle many legal questions that may arise.

### Liabilities of Noncompliance

**Premature disposal** — If records are destroyed before their retention periods expire, the public interest is potentially endangered because of:

1. Unplanned expenses of financial settlements or loss of revenues,

2. Disruption of efficiency due to gaps in information, and
3. Irretrievable loss of historical legacy.

**Lack of disposal** — Because records have a life span, there is a point in time in which they are no longer needed and their continued maintenance becomes a liability due to:

1. Unnecessary expenditures for real estate, equipment and supplies,
2. Lack of efficiency as old record accumulations become unwieldy and anonymous (see chapters on "Records Storage" and "Files Management"), and
3. Safety hazards because of lack of systematic storage and disposal.

Useless records become a burden in the same way as any waste product does. Noncurrent records are perhaps a more insidious waste because without records management, they are not identified and are given the same treatment as the current, valuable information needed to safeguard the public interest.

## Summary

A records management program begins by conducting a records inventory to gain knowledge of holdings. Records may then be placed on records retention schedules.

Retention schedules summarize information about individual record series and designate minimum lengths of time records must be held in active and semiactive storage. Retention schedules also designate when and how a record may be disposed.

Timely and consistent records disposition results in increases in safety and efficiency and decreases in record keeping expenses. Use of the statewide disposal authorization process helps to eliminate inconsistent records destruction, thereby minimizing the likelihood of adverse legal, administrative, fiscal and historical impact.

Aiding local government officials and their staff with records management is the work of the Records and Forms Analysis Section of the division. The section offers advice to local government offices without charge. Records analysts are available to visit offices for on-site consultation. Analysts serve as a communication link between municipal and county agencies and authorities and the State Records Committee.

To obtain assistance, call the Bureau of Records Management at (609) 530-3200 or write: New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management, 2300 Stuyvesant Avenue, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey, 08625.